

# The Art of Improvising: The Be-Bop Language and the Minor Seventh Chords

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## Abstract

This article represents the second part of a simple and intuitive method, finalized to “speaking” the Be-Bop language almost immediately, without possessing any particular jazz background. We herein exclusively discuss the improvisation techniques regarding the Minor Seventh Chords. Starting from a specific extended “sentence”, built around the Minor Triad, we show how to instantly deduce further sentences, how to modify them, by cutting and adding “words”, and how to effectively combine them. Moreover, we briefly explain how to deal with tonicization, and how to use the sentences suitable for the Minor Seventh Chords on the “corresponding” Dominant Seventh and Half-Diminished Chords.

## Keywords

Jazz Improvisation, Be-Bop, Fast Learning, Triads, Minor Seventh Chords

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## 1. Introduction

We herein exclusively deal with the minor seventh chord, starting from a fundamental extended “sentence”, built around the minor triad, which immediately gives birth to three further sentences. The sentences so obtained can be easily cut, modified, by using new “words” (Wise, 1983) and extensions, and then combined. As elsewhere discussed (Cataldo, 2017), the peculiarity of the method lies fundamentally in the fact that the attention of the improviser is always focused on triads.

## 2. The Method

### 2.1. The Fundamental “Sentence”

We herein will deal with a *C-7* chord. Obviously, the method should be prac-

ticed and mastered in all 12 keys.

Although it is anything but a novelty (Wise, 1983), we will carry out the whole discussion in terms of *sentences* and *words*.

Before starting, it is worth underlining how the only required background actually consists in the mere knowledge of *triads*.

The fundamental sentence we have to start from is shown in **Figure 1**.

In **Figure 1**, like in all the staves in this paper (net of a single exception), the chordal notes (meant as the notes that constitute the triad) are highlighted in red.


The particular time signature (3/4) in **Figure 1**, chosen exclusively for the sake of convenience, is related to the “odd periodicity” of the sentence. On this subject, it is worth underlining how the sentence in question could have been equivalently written in 6/4 time, so emphasizing its periodic behavior.

## 2.2. Learning to “See” the Minor Triad

The fundamental sentence can be evidently played starting from each of the chordal notes, by means of a simple *translation*.

It is essential to underline that, in playing both the sentence we have just examined and the ones that will arise from it, *the musician must focus his/her attention “exclusively” on the minor triad and its inversions* (in case of translation).

From the pattern shown in **Figure 1**, exploiting the translation and carrying out a banal *cutting*, we immediately deduce the three following sentences:



All the anacruses are clearly optional.

Although the topic is not herein properly addressed, we highlight how the sentences in Staves (1), (2), and (3) lend themselves, very evidently, to several metric displacements.

At this point, it is worth practicing the following exercise, based upon the minor triad and the ascending (chromatic) approach:



By means of a simple metric displacement, from the previous exercise, we can deduce the following:



From Staves (1), (2), and (3), the latter considered with a metric displacement, exploiting the previous exercise, we deduce the three following sentences:



(6)



(7)



(8)

At this point, we can already start to *combine* the sentences deduced, so as to obtain something more complex (Baker, 1988a, 1988b, 1988c, 1988d; Wise, 1983).

For example, from Staves (5) and (7), the latter extended as shown in **Figure 1**, we can easily deduce the underlying long sentence:



(9)

Let's now practice the following pattern, based upon the mixed approach concept:



(10)

The previous sentence allows the musician to sound very “chromatic”.

Obviously, coherently with what highlighted at the beginning of this section, in performing the exercise proposed in Staff (10), the improviser must focus his/her attention “exclusively” on the minor triad.

We can clearly continue to mix the sentences, now with an additional ingredient.

For example, from Staff (2), considered without the anacrusis and extended as shown in **Figure 1**, and Staff (10), transposed an octave higher, we obtain:



(11)

Let's now consider the following new “word”, based upon the mixed approach concept, like the one in Staff (10), but built, in this case, considering an ascending motion:



(12)



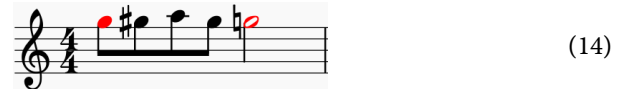
**Figure 1.** The Fundamental “Sentence”.

Exploiting the word just considered, we can obtain a great deal of new sentences.

For example, from Staff (1), transposed an octave lower and stopped at the fifth, Staff (10), and Staff (12), we obtain:



Let's now consider another new "word", nothing but a very short "back and forth" chromatic bridge between the fifth and the (major) sixth:



From Staff (6), considered without the anacrusis and stopped at the fifth, exploiting the new word just obtained, we deduce the following sentence:



The previous sentence allows to modify the fundamental one. In **Figure 2** an alternative version of the fundamental sentence, now with an "even periodicity", is shown.

Following a line of reasoning that, at this point, should be clear, the sentence in **Figure 2** can be exploited to deduce a great deal of further sentences.

### 2.3. Chromatic Bridges between Diatonic Thirds

Let's consider the descending chromatic bridge between the fifth and the root. Obviously, the above-mentioned bridge can be imagined as being arisen from the juxtaposition of two shorter descending chromatic bridges (the first links the fifth to the minor third, the second links the minor third to the root):



Obviously, the shorter bridges can be also used independently.

For example, from Staff (1), cut once we reach the minor third, we have:



Similarly, ignoring the anacrusis and carrying out a cutting, from Staff (2) we have:



**Figure 2.** The Fundamental "Sentence" with an "Even Periodicity".

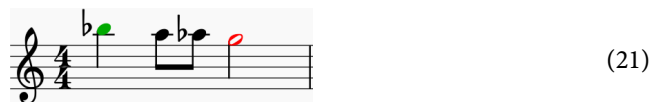
From Staves (14) and (16) we obtain:



From Staff (2), ignoring the anacrusis and carrying out a simple cutting, exploiting the sentence just obtained, we have:



Let's now consider the following new word:



Very evidently, the prior word simply consists in a descending chromatic bridge, this time between the minor seventh (depicted in green) and the fifth.

From Staves (16) and (21), we immediately obtain:



From Staves (18) and (21), we have:



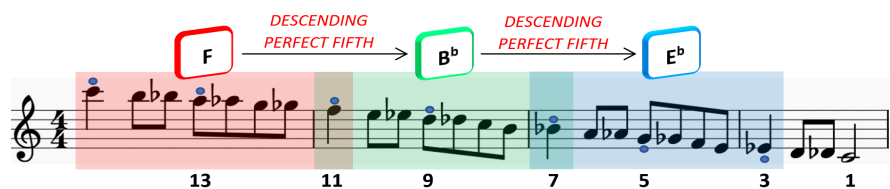
From Staves (19) and (21), the first stopped at the third, we have:



Following the same line of reasoning, we can easily deal with all the further available tensions (ninth, eleventh, thirteenth). **Figure 3** shows how to build descending chromatic bridges between all the available tensions (between all the diatonic thirds), by exclusively thinking about *three fundamental major triads*. Once again, it is worth highlighting how this method is entirely based upon triads.

## 2.4. The Power of Tonicization

The minor seventh chords can be *tonicized* (Dobbins, 2010; Levine, 2009). The procedure is practically indispensable when the chord remains the same for a



**Figure 3.** Chromatic Bridges between Diatonic Thirds.

certain number of bars (suffice it to think about structures such as the one of “So What”).

For example, *C-7* can be followed and/or preceded by *G7*, sometimes considered with the flat ninth, so as to legitimize a “diminished substitution” (Parker, 1978).

One of the strong points of the method consists in the fact that all the sentences we have deduced (and all the ones that can be further deduced by following the line of reasoning herein exploited) are perfectly suitable for a tonicized minor chord, no matter where the tonicization actually takes place.

If we consider, for example, the sentence in Staff (1), we easily realize how it can be played considering whatever kind of tonicization (whatever kind of “tonicized harmonic progression”) based on *C-7*:

(25)

(26)

(27)

In order to provide a further example, we can consider the sentence in Staff (22) and verify how it can be evidently played imposing whatever kind of tonicization:

(28)

(29)

(30)

The suitability of a particular sentence can be locally checked, bearing in mind that, obviously, the dominant seventh chords can be altered.

In Staves (25), (26), and (30) (referring, in the latter, to the last bar), *E<sub>b</sub>* represents the flat thirteenth of *G*; in Staves (29) and (30) (referring, in the latter, to the first bar), *B<sub>b</sub>* (that is enharmonic with *A<sub>#</sub>*) represents the sharp ninth of *G*.

## 2.5. The “Corresponding” Dominant Seventh Chord

In the Be-Bop language, net of rare exceptions, a minor seventh chord can be serenely imagined as being associated to a *Dorian* mode (Levine, 2009). In other

terms, in spite of the role played in the particular harmonic progression and notwithstanding possible tonicizations, a minor seventh chord can be considered as being a second degree.

In our case, consequently, *C-7* can be considered as being a “relative” of *F7*’s, since both the chords arise from the harmonization of *Bb Ionian* (D’Errico, 2017).

On this subject, exploiting the first part of the method (Cataldo, 2017), let’s consider one of the “fundamental sentences” that can be played on *F7*. The sentence in question is shown in **Figure 4**, with the chordal notes (the ones that constitute the *F Major Triad*) depicted in red, and the minor seventh (with respect to *F*) depicted in green.

In **Figure 5** we rewrite the same sentence: this time, however, the chordal notes, depicted in red, and the minor seventh, depicted in green, resume referring to *C-7*.

It is very easy to verify how the sentence in **Figure 5** is perfectly suitable for *C-7*. Moreover, following a procedure that, by now, should be fully understood, we can deduce a great deal of new sentences, omitted for brevity, that can be furtherly modified and combined with the ones to date obtained.

In addition to this, we can state that, by virtue of the harmonic relationship discussed in this paragraph, all the sentences suitable for *C-7* can be played on *F7*, although with some “precautions”: some sentences, in fact, work better when the chord is provided with the sharp ninth, some others are to be preferred when the chord is suspended, and so on.

## 2.6. The “Corresponding” Half-Diminished Seventh Chord

In the light of the harmonic relationship briefly discussed in the previous paragraph, *C-7* can also be considered as being a “relative” of *A-7b5*. More precisely, *A-7b5* (*Locrian*) is the “relative in common” (considering diatonic thirds) for both *C-7* (*Dorian*, a minor third higher) and *F7* (*Mixolydian*, a major third lower) (D’Errico, 2017).

On this subject, let’s consider once again the sentence, suitable for *F7*, shown in **Figure 4**. In **Figure 5** we have already rewritten this sentence, as a “function” of *C-7*. Now, we can rewrite the same sentence as a function of *A-7b5*. The rewritten sentence is shown in **Figure 6**, with the chordal notes (the ones that



**Figure 4.** A “Fundamental Sentence” for *F7*.



**Figure 5.** A “Fundamental Sentence” for *F7*, as a “function” of *C-7*.



**Figure 6.** A “Fundamental Sentence” for *F7* or *C-7*, as a “function” of *A-7b5*.

constitute the *A Diminished Triad* depicted in red, and the minor seventh (with respect to *A*) depicted in green.

The sentence in **Figure 6**, by means of a banal translation, gives birth to three further sentences (one for each of the chordal notes, omitted for brevity) that can be modified and combined following the usual procedure, so as to build a “vocabulary” suitable for the Half-Diminished Chords. The number of sentences suitable for this kind of chord can be further increased by exploiting the harmonic relationship discussed in the two previous paragraphs. In order to provide an example, based upon the specific case herein shortly addressed, many of the sentences suitable for *C-7* and *F7* can be serenely played “as they are” on *A-7b5*.

### 3. Brief Conclusion

This method constitutes nothing but a simplified introduction to the Be-Bop language. Nonetheless, all the sentences herein deduced, net of possible “enrichments” (Cataldo, 2017) and combinations with “public domain” patterns (Coker et al., 1982; Nelson, 2010), can be easily found by examining well-known solo transcriptions (Garland, 1999; Kelly, 2013; Parker, 1978; Powell, 1998, 2002).

The fundamental peculiarity of the method, once again, consists in the fact that the attention of the improviser, whose jazz background can be very minimal, is fundamentally focused on triads: basically, there is no need to know anything else to start playing Be-Bop. Obviously, the knowledge of harmony and the capability of mastering several effective scales (hexatonic, such as the whole-tone scale; heptatonic, such as the super-Locrian; octatonic, such as the half-tone-tone), as well as very popular patterns, allow the musician, beyond any doubt, to further enrich his/her language and, above all, to play with reasonable consciousness (D’Errico, 2015).

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